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ABSTRACT

Experiential education as a teaching strategy differs from traditional classroom learning largely because the sequence of events in the process is reversed. In experiential education the learner first carrys out an action, sees the results, and from this basis generates concepts and principles. By first understanding the basic components of the experiential learning process, the teacher can more readily adapt them to his own teaching style and locale. The basic framework for experiential learning does not rest on experience for experience's sake alone: it must include highly-structured events based on five specific components. The framework first includes (1) a learner entering the program with his own unique set of experiences, expectations, needs, prejudices, level of maturity and motivational readiness. He is placed into (2) a demanding reality contest necessitating (3) new, applied skills that are followed immediately by (4) responsible, challenging action. With the action must come (5) the opportunity for critical analysis and reflection, for this will link practice with theory, transfer learning to broader considerations, and provide for a sense of synthesis and closure. By using this framework as a guideline for designing experience-based curricula, teachers and administrators can utilize experiential learning both as an igniter and as a vehicle for closure and synthesis within the traditional curriculum. (DS)

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EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION: STRENGTHENING THE LEARNING PROCESS

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The ghost of John Dewey is probably downright dizzy as a result of what's been written regarding "experiential learning" in recent years. As is evident by reading almost any educational journal, experience-based innovations are receiving considerable attention these days. Words like "youth participation" and "action learning" crop up everwhere. Discrete experiential vehicles like Outward Bound and the Foxfire Learning Concept have received nation-wide attention, resulting in a variety of local attempts to adapt and interpret.

New programs come and go almost with the blink of an eye. It is not their arrival as much as their rapid departure, however, that signals educators haven't moved far beyond equating experiential learning with a student simply leaving the school ground to "experience the real world".

An increasing number of experiential learning advocates believe programs fail to become an integral part of the curriculum because of a lack of understanding in some critical areas. First, we must recognize that experiential education, as a teaching strategy, differs from classroom learning largely because the sequence of events in the process is reversed. Classroom learning usually begins with the dispensing of a particular body of information (via a book, film, or lecture). This information is then meant to be organized and assimilated by the student and finally "learned" when it is actually applied through action. Experiential learning takes just the reverse track. The learner is presented

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with the opportunity to carry out an action and see the effects of that action. From this base, general concepts and principals are generated. This reversal is extremely important as it is the basis for a level of intrinsic motivation and learner-centered responsibility that is difficult to achieve through the use of traditional methods.

Secondly, it is important to recognize that these two teaching strategies need not necessarily be mutually exclusive. Rather, they can be blended to give the learner both a sufficient breadth of information and a complementary depth of experience. This blending, which is critical to the development of any well-balanced curriculum, depends on a clear understanding of the key components of this reverse track.

This understanding has often been clouded by well-known program descriptions. For example, assumptions about adventure education (a popular variety of experiential learning) are often colored by the program elements of Outward Bound and lead people to associate "doing adventure education" with climbing gear, mountain peaks or islands off the coast of Maine. "Why, you can't do Outward Bound in Kansas can you?" Maybe not, but you can do adventure education there and everywhere else for that matter...if you understand the basis components of the experiential learning process.

The popular Foxfire books have similarily caused teachers and students to think, "Why, we don't have any moonshiners or Appalachian craftsment in Cleveland. We can't 'do Foxfire' here, can we?" No, you

can't do Foxfire in Cleveland. Foxfire is a specific, discrete program in Rabun Gap, Georgia. But, if you consider the basic components of this style of experiential learning, as Eliot Wigginton outlines in his book Moments[1/], then you can design your own cultural journalism interpretation... right there in Cleveland.

This scenario, brought on by a confusion of specific program characteristics with the fundamental process of learning by experience goes on and on every day. Educators are constantly thwarted or worse, misdirected in their efforts to adapt experiential programs to their own teaching styles and locales, by misconceptions arising from a lack of a generic base for learning by experience.

Even when educators attempt to design something unique instead of a replication, eager teachers and administrators often interpret the experiential learning movement as advocating that any experience is genuinely or equally educative. To simply include an experiential component is not enough, and, to believe it is, simply sets in motion program flaws which will ultimately cause this latest innovation to disappear.

In essence, I believe we've lacked a clear understanding of the basic framework for experiential learning--something that can underpin an experiential component to any given curriculum, regardless of how simple or complex that component might be. Fundamental to this understanding is

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1/ Wigginton, Eliot, Moments, The Foxfire Experience, IDEAS Washington, D.C. 1975

the acknowledgement that experiential learning involves highly structured events, with a significant degree of involvement on the part of the teacher--not simply "experience for experience sake alone".

The nature of this framework and how it is represented in three very successful experiential vehicles is the focus for the second half of this article.

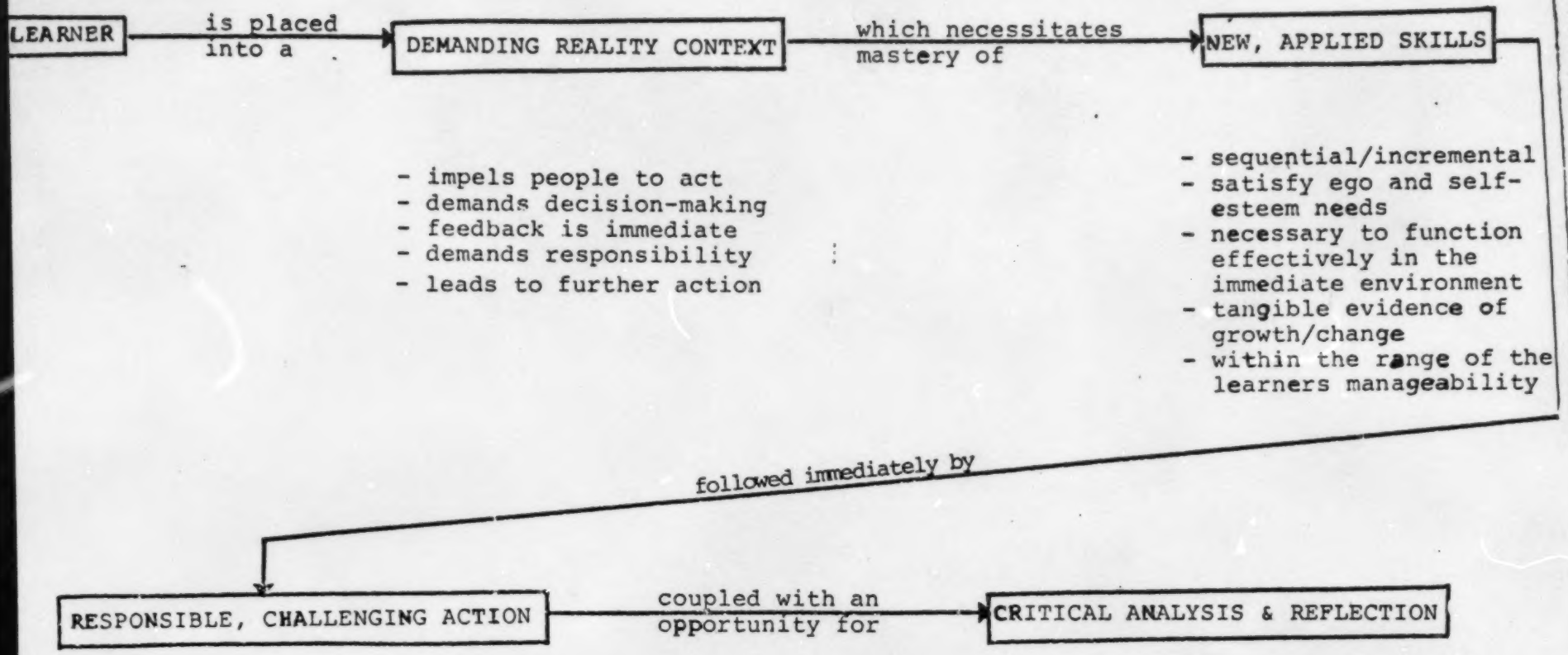
Over the past six years, I have worked closely with the program components of a variety of highly successful "learning through experience" models in an attempt to extract a fundamental process or framework which could serve as a guideline for designing experience-based curricula. These include adventure-based education (as interpreted by the various Outward Bound schools around the country) cultural journalism (the basis for the popular Foxfire books and magazines), and craftsmanship education (as interpreted by a boat building apprenticeship program at the Apprenticeshop in Bath, Maine).

As a result of this inquiry, I believe the process of learning by experience occurs when:

> *The learner is placed into a Demanding Reality Context which necessitates the mastery of New, Applied Skills followed immediately by Responsible, Challenging Action coupled with an opportunity for Critical Ananysis and Reflection.*

(see flow chart on following page)

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROCESS FLOW


LEARNER
is placed into a
DEMANDING REALITY CONTEXT
which necessitates mastery of
NEW, APPLIED SKILLS
- impels people to act
- demands decision-making
- feedback is immediate
- demands responsibility
- leads to further action
- sequential/incremental
- satisfy ego and self-esteem needs
- necessary to function effectively in the immediate environment
- tangible evidence of growth/change
- within the range of the learners manageability
followed immediately by
RESPONSIBLE, CHALLENGING ACTION
coupled with an opportunity for
CRITICAL ANALYSIS & REFLECTION
- others dependent on one's actions
- consequences of one's actions are experienced directly by self and others
- meaningful (not trivial)
- beyond previous range of one's knowledge
- involves planning/decision-making that affects self and others
- meets genuine needs of self and society
- links practice with theory
- supportive of the action
- transfer/analogs to broader considerations
- provides for a sense of synthesis and closure

(From: An Inquiry Into The Learning Process Underlying Various Modes of Experientially-based Education, an M.Ed. Report by Ron Gager, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, 1976.

In an attempt to clarify the various components and relate each to the three program interpretations which constitute the focus of this article, a sequential elaboration follows.

Each learner enters this flow with his/her own unique set of prior experiences, expectations, needs, prejudices, level of maturity and motivational readiness. Though certain program interpretations often demand specific, set levels or pre-existing conditions, in most simple terms every learner begins the process wherever he or she is.

A demanding setting is any condition, event or object, or combination thereof, that impels the learner to act. This I believe is a most critical element of any experientailly-based learning process and is what initially sets this process apart from the more conventional approches to learning. The learner is impelled into action. Something reaches out, "touches" the learner and simply can't be ignored. Choices are presented, decisions must be made, feedback is immediate. Adventure-based Education, Cultural Journalism and Craftsmanship Education all possess this impelling quality.

Traditionally, Adventure-based Education has sought to utilize the out-of-doors almost exclusively, and in doing so has earned the ambiguous title of "outdoor education". However, in addition to the impelling nature of the out-of-doors, numerous community-based programs have shown that

equally stimulating and impelling environments abound outside of the normal realm of outdoor education, and have just begun to provide the experiential teacher with a broader view of the availability of demanding settings in which learning can occur.

Describing an alternative semester program in Colorado Springs, Colorado, which offers in-depth, hands-on contact with over 300 various people, agencies and institutions in the community and the state at large, Larry Haise writes:

> *"The main feature of the Seminar is what we feel is an intensity and depth of involvement for the individual student that is difficult to achieve in usual classroom settings. Bound together in small groups in extended learning situations, students are urged to cooperate well in solving problems, to come to terms with their potential as leaders, and to develop values which help make them effective citizens of their society and world."* 2/

Similarly, young people across the country are finding through the hundreds of spin-offs of Wigginton's original Foxfire project, a direct and vitaliy important link with their own cultural base. The challenge to research and document one's cultural heritage, through intense, personal contact with the learner's own community, provides for a depth of involvement in the process of learning that is truly impelling and requires immediate decision making on the part of each and every student.

In summing up his own personal feelings, for the 72 year old woman he chose as the subject for his first article in his school's cultural

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2/ Haise, Larry, et al, Senior Seminar Curriculum Booklet, Mitchell High School, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1975

journalism magazine, high school student, James Janetti, most eloquently reflects this impelling quality:

> *"Seeing Mary awakens me to a different reality, actually a more realistic reality, where a person's fate depends directly upon [one's] desire and motivational force. Whether it is deer hunting or fishing or farming, Mary's life is always a direct challenge of determination against obstacles. I find it easy to respect a person who has dealt all of her life in these terms."* 3/

Writing in a journal, a student involved with the building of wooden boats at the Apprenticeshop in Bath, Maine, likewise speaks of the bond which forms between the learner and the impelling nature of a demanding setting:

> *"Maybe that's the driving attraction to the creative process, this fighting back, this assembling from total randomness, wood grain grown at the whims of nature carefully appraised and re-directed into an extremely complex and ordered form. There is nothing more random than a tree, nothing more unrandom than a wooden boat".*

In each of these instances, the learner is presented with choices, decisions must be made, responsibility is demanded and feedback is immediate. A highly structured fundamental learning process is at work. A flow is begun which carries the learner into subsequent action.

Returning to my initial articulation of the process of learning by experience, the demanding setting inherent in the three vehicles with which I've worked impels the learner to act--to enter a flow which carries the learner into the immediate need to master new applied skills and on into responsible, challenging action. The challenge then is to assist the learner in the discovery of and immersion in such impelling contexts.

3/ Jannetti, James, Mary T's Farm, SALT Magazine, Kennebunk High School, Kennebunk, Maine, 1976.

They need not be complex, in fact simplicity and forthrightness is perhaps even preferred. They do however tend to be most powerful when they are task oriented and lead the student to an intimate interaction with a tangible product. And, as indicated by these examples, they abound everywhere for every learner.

The necessity to master new, applied skills is the direct result of the demanding reality context into which the learner is placed. Eliot Wigginton speaks of the impact of such skills when he states that "before a student can act effectively he has to know he can act ... that before he can become truly sensitive to, and concerned about, other people's egos and needs, he has to have his own ego and needs satisfied."[4/] In cultural journalism, the personal creation of an article which will appear in the publication necessitates the mastery of new skills applied to a concrete task leading to a personal relationship with a tangible product.

The skills necessary to transfer the lines from a set of blueprints to the finished product--a small wooden boat in the case of the Apprenticeshop in Bath, Maine--provide for the learner immersed in a craftsmanship discipline, a similar opportunity to gain self-confidence. Writing of this step in the process Christopher Hall and Lance Lee state:

> *"Wooden boatbuilding gives students a general as well as 'professional' competence. It results too in more important qualities, quiet pride, a steady working pace and the ability and willingness to make decisions .... Joinery taken to a thirty-second of an inch, sanding, kneeling under the bilge while driving many of the 4,000 inch-and-a-half wood screws in a pinky's hull or cutting and checking the changing bevel of 24 cedar planks of that boat is work ... trial and error, pain and joy".*[5/]

4. Moments, The Foxfire Experience, Op. Cit.

5. Hall, Christopher and Lee, Lance, Apprenticing Revisited, The Apprenticeshop, Bath, Maine, 1975.

Brought about by the demands of the learning environment, such skills provide for the learner tangible evidence of growth and change, and impel one into subsequent action.

It is tempting I fear to view these skills as ends in themselves (such as is the case I suspect with many of the new programs which come and go). However, the flow presented here proceeds into responsible, challenging action without hesitancy .... perhaps the hallmark of the experiential learning process.

Implied in these terms are the obligation to be held accountable and the right to risk and experience failure. In addition, it appears critical that the action 1) meet genuine needs; and 2) require planning or decision making affecting others. The new skills a student learns are "tools of the trade" which immediately will be put to use. The three vehicles with which this article deals share this important quality--something which is lacking in more vicarious forms of learning where the direct application of skills learned is put off, sometimes indefinitely.

For example, students involved with the Handmade Shelters component of the Senior Seminar at Mitchell High School in Colorado Springs, Colorado find themselves reintroduced to the tools of the trigonometry and geometry through the direct involvement with the design and construction of a full-scale geodesic dome. Outward Bound students experience a similar sequence throughout the 23-day course as such skills as knot tying and campcraft are immediately followed by the need to safeguard the descent of an icy snow slope or to secure a campsite in the face of an impending storm, while the application of basic woodworking skills to the construction of a seaworthy

boat yields similar opportunities for the apprentice boat builder. The responsibilities to tell an accurate story, to meet a specific deadline and to fulfill obligations to subscribers provides the reality test for cultural journalism students.

The opportunity for critical analysis and reflection is the final ingredient in the process flow. In this context I am referring to the need to 1) link practice with theory; 2) reflect upon and examine one's experience in order for it to "take"; and 3) attempt to make a transfer from what is learned through experience to broader considerations. Experience alone does not automatically produce learning. How then, do we orchestrate the critical linkage between the experience and something behond? The answer is as broad and complex as is the human condition. Some teachers use group discussions, others encourage students to keep journals, still others ask probing questions on tests or examinations. Just how this happens must ultimately be decided for each individual teacher and I hope for each individual learner. But the need to provide the opportunity for transfer cannot be overlooked. It is the time for synthesis ... for achieving a sense of closure, and for establishing the next "ignition" in the learning cycle.

I believe the challenge of creating "impelling" experiences demands that we make use of linkages and adaptions of proven program designs. The idea of forming linkages arises from a feeling that for most learners, a set of mutually reinforcing experiences provides for the most positive growth. Also present is the thought that although each of the three vehicles

from which this process was distilled stands well on its own, each learner presents the teacher with such a unique set of needs so as to almost preclude any one vheicle from being all things to all learners.

The thought is also important when one considers the wide variety of differences in terms of needs and teaching styles represented by any given faculty. It is in this respect that teachers wishing to balance information with action should consciously seek out linkages among proven program designs. Furthermore, teachers should be ecnouraged to include community institutions other than schools in the design of experience-based programs. These linkages may perhaps be the most critical and they truely bring the community into the learning process.

To effectively and positively "touch" all learners, we as educators must come to grips with the notion that the critical issue is ultimately whether or not the learner can make a transfer from a specific set of experiences to broader considerations. And, though possible, this task most often proves too complex for any single experiential vehicle. It seems that if one comes at the issue of "transfer" from a process orientation, the ideal of linkages is a most natural one. Removing the constraints which arise out of an attempt to make a particular program "fit" into another setting, allows the teacher to make an interpretation in light of the needs of each specific group of learners. This then becomes a process of <u>adaptation</u> rather than replication, and experiential learning can readily become one of many instructional tools which blend with rather than exist outside of the traditional school.

At Tannehill Historical State Park located near Birmingham, Alabama, the creation of such linkages has become a natural part of the evolution of a learning center to be located at the Park. Working closely with IDEAS, a Washington, D.C.-based educational organization, a group of Alabama teachers, students, folklorists, college and university faculty and representatives of a number of state agencies have been designing an educational component to the park utilizing the process orientation outlined in this article. The overall strategy has been to establish and work through collaborative networks to survey the resources, needs, constraints and capabilities of the Alabama educational community and the state at large, and then come at the development of an educational component to the Park through a wedding of the results of the survey with the demands of the experiential learning process.

The result of this strategy has been the design of an experiential learning center which will serve students from pre-school through graduate studies by the creation of an evolving mix of experience-based demonstration projects. Growing out of balancing local needs, resources, and interests with the experiential learning process, these demonstrations will include programs in cultural journalism, outdoor/adventure education, craftsmanship/apprenticing, performing/visual arts and architectural preservation. Perhaps most significant however, has been the decision to utilize the demonstration projects as laboratory settings to introduce pre-service and in-service teachers to the process of learning through experience. Drawing on existing teacher education and in-service training programs around the state, the Tannehill learning

center will soon be providing opportunities for teachers to personally "experience" the process, work with students in a demonstration setting, and ultimately adapt, not replicate what they've learned to their own local communities.

Experience-based theories of instruction have come a long way since their rediscovery in the 1960's Models such as Outward Bound, Foxfire and the Apprenticeshop have clearly demonstrated that both cognitive and affective goals can be achieved through the experiential learning process. The challenge now is to apply what has been learned largely outside of the traditional school to the everyday lives of school children who remain within the traditional school setting. I believe that by working with the learning process outlined in this article, teachers and administrators can readily adapt its concept so as to include experiential learning both as an igniter and as a vehicle for closure and synthesis within the traditional curriculum.